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ABSTRACT

A community-based sexuality education program for parents and their puberty-aged children is described, and findings of a follow-up survey of the program are reported. The program was developed to provide factual information about puberty and sexuality which would serve as a basis for increased communication about sexuality between parents and children. The 2-hour program was presented by male and female human development specialists from the Cooperative Extension Service of the University of Georgia or other specially trained professionals. The program provided separate sessions for parents and sons aged 10-13 and for parents and daughters aged 10-13. Videos were used to provide information and stimulate discussion. Questions from participants influenced the depth of the discussion. Follow-up evaluation data from a sample of 35 fathers, 150 mothers, 70 boys, and 98 girls indicated that programs which reach their audience only once can in fact make a difference in the attitudes, knowledge, and behavior of participants. Findings also indicated factors that had a critical influence on communication about sexuality and sexual values, the degree to which parents assumed responsibility for such communication, and the particular needs of parents residing in rural areas. Implications of the findings are listed. (RH)

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PARENTS AND PUBERTY: ENCOURAGING FAMILY COMMUNICATION

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In 1986, The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service, initiated a community-based program directed at sexuality education for parents and their puberty-age children. The following includes basic information about the program and the results of a follow-up survey.

PURPOSE OF PROGRAM

The program was developed to provide factual information about puberty and sexuality in general which will serve as a base for increasing communication about sexuality between parents and children. The research to support the need for sexuality education is more than adequate. Parents want to be the primary sexuality educators for their children, but they also recognize that they need help from professionals (Louis Harris Associates, 1986). Adolescents want information, but they also want to know how their parents' values fit with the facts (Fisher, 1986). Effective sexuality education programs take a comprehensive approach. They include schools, churches, community groups, organizations, etc. and they target parents and youth (Hofferth and Hayes, 1987). Georgia now has a sexuality education law which mandates programs for grades K-12. County curriculum is developed to meet the criteria for each grade as established by the State Department of Education. The current focus in many counties is grades 4-6. "Growing Up and Understanding It" complements the school curriculum and adds a community component with parent involvement.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION AND TARGET AUDIENCE

The two-hour program is conducted at night so that parents and youth can attend together. Parent(s) and sons aged 10-13 participate in one session; parent(s) and daughters aged 10-13 meet in another. Male and female Human Development Specialists or Agents from the Cooperative Extension Service or other professionals from the local area, who have been trained in sexuality education present the program to boys and girls respectively. Though emphasis is placed on puberty education and communication about sexuality, questions from the group guide the depth of the discussion. The videos, Dear Diary and Am I Normal? are used to provide information and stimulate discussion.

FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION

Between February 1989 and April 1990, Don Bower and Mary Anne Pace, Human Development Specialists with the Cooperative Extension Service, presented 27 programs throughout Georgia. In order to gain insight from the participants as to their perceptions of the effect of the program on their attitudes, behavior and knowledge, a survey was mailed (May 1990) to 19 of the 27 counties which hosted the program. In addition to collecting basic demographic data, four questions were asked for parents/youth. Their responses were based on the scale below:

1	2	3	4	5
Much Less	Some Less	No Difference	Some More	Much More

1. Do you understand more or less about sexuality because of the program?
2. Do you now talk more or less with your child/parents about sexuality because of the program?
3. Are you now more or less comfortable discussing sexuality because of the program?
4. Are you now more or less likely to discuss your sexual values with your child/parents as a result of this program?

SAMPLE

The sample includes 35 fathers, 150 mothers, and 168 youth (98 girls and 70 boys). The adult sample includes some parents who did not attend the program, as well as those who did. Fifty-seven percent of the fathers were between the ages of 36 and 45 and 65% of the mothers were between the ages of 31 and 40. All of the fathers were married except one who was divorced; 75% of the mothers were married and the remainder were divorced, separated, widowed, or never married. Eight-three percent of the respondents were from rural environments. Fifty-one percent of the children were 10 or 11 years old; thirty-six percent were 12 or 13. All youth respondents attended the program. The time between the program and the survey mailing varied from 1 month to 14 months.

FINDINGS

Table I (page 3) indicates the percentage of parents and youth who responded "more" or "less" to each of the four survey items presented above. Responses of "No Difference" are excluded from the table and account for percentages summing to less than 100. More than 50 percent of the respondents from all three groups (fathers, mothers and youth) indicated either "some more" or "much more" as their response to each of the questions. A greater percentage of mothers than fathers indicated a positive change as a result of the program. More parents indicated a positive change for questions 3 and 4 (attitudes/behavior), while more youth indicated a positive change for questions 1 and 2 (knowledge).

Table I

Question		Fathers	Mothers	Youth
No. 1 -	Understand more	48%	60%	82%
	Understand less	0	0	0
No. 2 -	Talk more	57%	69%	75%
	Talk less	0	2%	16%
No. 3 -	More comfortable	66%	73%	65%
	Less comfortable	3%	2%	7%
No. 4 -	More likely to discuss sexual values	66%	70%	62%
	Less likely to...	0	2%	10%

The following relations were found using stepwise multiple regression.

Among mothers who responded to the survey (attended or did not attend):

* mothers talk more about sexuality when they are first - comfortable discussing sexuality, second - understand more about sexuality.
* mothers discuss sexual values more if they are first - comfortable discussing sexuality and second - understand more about sexuality.
* mothers are more comfortable discussing sexuality if the child discusses sexual values.
* mothers are more likely to discuss sexual values when the child is more likely to discuss sexual values.
* mothers talk more about sexuality with child when child talks more about sexuality with parent.

Based on the analysis of all fathers who responded to the survey (attended and did not attend):

* father is more comfortable talking about sexuality when child is more likely to discuss sexual values. (Due to the low number of fathers who responded, further analysis was not possible.)

Rural women scored significantly higher than urban women on two variables: "understanding about sexuality" and "more likely to discuss sexual values."

No significant relationships were found for age in relation to any of the four questions, for parents or youth.

No significant relationships were found between gender and responses to the four questions.

No significant relationships were found between marital status of the parents and their responses to the four questions.

There were no significant difference in the responses based on time between the program and the survey.

The charts below indicate the significantly-related variables (< .01, stepwise multiple regression) for mothers who attended the program with sons, mothers who attended the program with daughters, and youth who attended the program.

Mothers Attended Program
(mothers' responses)

Sons	Daughters
Comfort and Discuss sexual values (.70)**	Comfort and Discuss sexual values (.48)**
Understand sexuality and Comfortable (.55)**	Understanding sexuality and Comfortable (.45)**
Understand sexuality and Discuss values (.57)**	----
Talk about sexuality and Comfortable (.40)*	Talk about sexuality and Comfortable (.45)**
Talk about sexuality and Discuss values (.48)*	Talk about sexuality and Discuss values (.34)**

*p < .01 **p < .001

Youth Attended Program
(youth's responses)

Sons	Daughters
Comfortable and Discuss sexual values (.59)**	---
Discuss sexual values and talk sexuality (.53)**	Discuss sexual values and Talk sexuality (.45)**
---	Understand sexuality & talk sexuality (.34)**
Comfortable and talk about sexuality (.45)*	Comfortable and Talk about sexuality (.27)*
---	Comfortable and Understand sexuality (.32)*

*p < .01 **p < .001

On the questions regarding communication, no significant correlations emerged between mothers and sons; however, the following positive correlations exist between mothers and daughters who attended the program:

Daughter's talk about sexuality and mother's comfort .01
Daughter's discussion of sexual values and mother's comfort .01

CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that:

1. Comfort of the mother is the most critical factor in determining whether she talks about sexuality with her child or discusses sexual values with her child. Understanding sexuality is of secondary significance.
2. The child also has an influence on the discussion by his/her willingness to talk about sexuality (in general) and/or discuss sexual values in particular.
3. Understanding of sexuality seems to have the weakest correlation of the four variables with communication about sexuality.
4. Programs which reach the audience only once can in fact make a difference in the attitudes, knowledge, and behavior of the participants.
5. The impact of the program does not significantly increase or decrease over time.
6. Mothers still assume the primary responsibility for sexuality education of their daughters and sons (as noted by numbers of participants at the programs as well as questionnaires returned).
7. Some children talk less about sexuality (16%), discuss sexual values less (10%), and feel less comfortable (7%) following the program.
8. Since there was no significant difference in the responses of youth for age, the early aspects of puberty could be presented to a younger age group and more in-depth programming offered to older youth.
9. Rural mothers need more sexuality programming and support for building comfort in communication about sexuality than urban mothers.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Puberty education classes for eight- to ten-year-olds could be effective in building family communication about sexuality.
2. Puberty education classes for mothers may increase the comfort level for communicating about sexuality, especially for rural women. The classes could also include techniques for getting the father more involved in sexuality education.
3. Puberty education is greatly needed because of the benefits to adults as well as youth. In light of the fact that "understanding" was found to be the least significant variable and that current surveys indicate adult ignorance about sexuality, it is needed more than ever.
4. Parents need to be aware that their child's characteristics, as well as their own, affect communication about sexuality.
5. Educators need to address the reasons for a potential decrease in discussion about sexuality following the program and how to overcome it. They also need to provide support/information which will guide the parents/youth to the next levels of communication.

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